DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 362 490 SP 034 744

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TITLE Understanding the Support Systems of Hispanic Teacher Candidates: A Study through In-Depth Interviews.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 36p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Education Majors; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Hispanic Americans; *Mentors; Minority Groups; Needs Assessment; *Preservice Teacher Education; *Social Support Groups; Student Experience; Student Needs; *Student Personnel Services; Teacher Education Programs
IDENTIFIERS Hispanic American Students

ABSTRACT

This study explores the background of minority teacher education candidates; their experience in teacher education courses and how the program met student goals and expectations; cultural conflicts they experienced in participating in teacher education; and the mentoring and support systems that the participants used or needed. Interviews held with 12 participants revealed that mentoring is an essential process that comes from the family support system ("La familia") or a group support system (the "Dile") of friends knowledgeable about the university system. As students passed into the college of education, they found that professors were more caring and helpful than those of the larger university setting. Hispanic students were uncomfortable using the central advisement center because of its formality and limited contact time per student. The paper concludes that the university must incorporate Hispanics' "La familia" and "Dile" support systems into its support systems. Not only should the student be oriented to the university, but the family as a whole should receive this orientation. (Contains approximately 25 references.) (JDD)

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ED 362 490

Understanding the Support Systems of Hispanic Teacher Candidates: A Study Through In-depth Interviews

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A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association held in Atlanta, Georgia, April 12 - 16, 1993.

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Understanding the Support Systems of Hispanic Teacher Candidates: A Study Through In-depth Interviews

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to understand the experience of minority teacher education candidates and the meaning they make of their experiences in teacher education.[1] The purpose of this study is to explore what it is like for minority teacher candidates in teacher education. We want to explore: a) how students' background, their schooling, family, work, religion and social experience prepare them for university life and particularly, those experiences that led them into teaching. b) We want to examine the cultural conflicts, that is, marginality, students may experience in coming to the university and their participation in teacher education and document the mentoring and support systems that the participants may use or express the need for.

[1] This study is partially supported by a grant from The Center for Regional Studies, University of New Mexico.

c) We want to examine their experience in their teacher education programs and courses and how the teacher education program, its curriculum, its methodologies, its assumptions, consider the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students and meet the students' goals and expectations. In order to understand the student's experience, we conducted three, ninety-minute interviews with each of the participants.

Significance of the Study

Researchers, demographers, and census takers have projected that by the year 2000, our nation's schools will be largely populated by a minority population (ACE, 1987). This growing minority population needs a classroom teacher population that reflects its student population. But the present and projected minority teacher population falls short of meeting the needs of a growing minority student population (AACTE, 1987).

In order to understand the reasons for the shortage of

minority classroom teachers, we need to look at the historical and present educational conditions of minority students. Furthermore, we need to examine how so-called "standards of excellence" operate to deter minorities who pursue teaching as a career.

Some researchers explain that the shortage in recruitment of minority teachers can be attributed in part to the growing professional opportunities that minorities have gained since the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., Irvine, 1988). Others, however, have taken a more critical look at this shortage and have cited instead the inadequate education that minorities have long been provided. Banks (1989), for example, clarifies an important point when he states that we have shortages of minority doctors, lawyers and engineers. He sees that the problem emanates from an education system that does not serve the needs of its minority population. Furthermore, some researchers argue that educators are well aware of the effects of an inadequate education system (Pine & Hillard,

1990). The rising number of dropouts (or push-outs) among the minority student body and the low indices of academic achievement among this population clearly indicates a crisis.

Not only are educational practices making it more difficult for minorities to succeed in schools, but for those who do succeed and wish to continue on to college, the financial expense is often too great a burden (Chinn, 1987). The decrease in Federal monies for financial assistance and scholarships has adversely affected the prospects of minorities seeking financial assistance for post-secondary education (Holmes, 1988; Farrell, 1990).

"Standards of excellence" as defined by higher scores on the ACT, SAT, and preservice skills tests are preventing many minority students from entering college and teacher education programs (Chinn, 1987; Dilworth, 1988). Some researchers have questioned the inherent cultural bias of such tests (Gifford, 1986), and have indicated that an adverse effect of these entrance tests is the decreasing interest of minorities

to consider teaching as a career (Witty, 1986).

In a time when educational research is focusing on the development and socialization of teachers (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986), our focus on the experience of minority teacher education candidates adds to the growing understanding of teacher socialization. We seek to understand the experience of minority teacher candidates and how their goals and objectives for becoming teachers are being met in their teacher education curriculum.

Research Design

In this study, we interviewed twelve participants for four and a half hours each on their experience of being a teacher education candidate. In order to gain access to the meaning and understanding of the participant's experience as a teacher candidate, three, ninety-minute, phenomenologically based, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant.

Methodology

In-depth, phenomenological interviewing is a research model based on a format utilized by Ken Dolbeare and David Schuman (see, Schuman, 1982) which has been further developed by Seidman (1983; 1985; 1991). According to Seidman this interviewing model operates on the assumption, taken from Schutz (1967), that one makes meaning of his or her experience after reflecting on the constitutive details of that experience. This interviewing model follows a sequence of three, ninety-minute, interviews spaced three to seven days apart (Seidman, 1983; 1985; 1991). The structure and sequence of the interviewing allows the participant to reconstruct the experience and then to reflect on the meaning of that experience (Seidman & Santilli, 1988; Seidman, 1991).

The first interview focuses on the life history of the participant and the events and experiences that have led them to the work that they are presently undertaking, in this case, pursuing a degree in teacher education. We focus on those

experiences that have led the participants into education. For example, we would ask the participant to describe their experiences in elementary, middle/junior and high school. We would ask the participants about their parents' perspective on education and how that affects their perspective. We would ask who their favorite teacher was? What was their favorite subject? This interview provides a description of the participants' social and autobiographical background.

The focus of the second interview is the participants' present experience as teacher candidates. In this interview the participants are asked to describe, as concretely as possible, the details of their experience as teacher candidates. What is it like to be a student in teacher education? How would you describe your ethnic identity? What is it like to be a (Chicano, Hispanic, Mexican American) [2] in this teacher education program? What is your relationship like with

[2] We are not placing a label on the ethnicity of the student. Each student is asked to name themselves ethnically.

faculty; with administrators; with your advisor; with your fellow students? This second interview describes the participant's experience within an organizational context.

The third, and final, interview asks the participants about the meaning they make of their experience as teacher education candidates. The first and second interviews create the foundation from which the participants can make connections and reflect on the meaning of becoming a teacher. In this interview the participants are asked to explain what does it mean to be studying to become a teacher?

The structure of the interview model permits the participants to reconstruct and to reflect on their experience. This process of "self-explication" (Seidman & Santilli, 1988) allows the participants to describe the events that they find relevant to their experience. This differs from a formal interview in which the interviewer comes to the process with a pre-determined set of questions. Yet, this does not mean that the interviewer does not have an agenda. In this study,

the focus of the research is on the meaning and understanding that minority teacher education candidates have of their experience in a teacher education program. This requires that the participants speak to the issues of their experience in teacher education.

Working with the Material

The interviews were tape-recorded. Each interview was transcribed and these transcriptions read by a research committee. This research committee was composed of the two investigators. Each reader marked those passages that they found compelling. Those marked passages were labelled and placed into theme files. The themes which emerged provided us with a deeper understanding of the experience of the teacher candidates.

Selection of the Participants

Our strategy for selecting participants was based on what is termed purposeful sampling. (See, Patton, 1987, pp. 91 - 108). We wanted to interview minority teacher

candidates. In selecting the participants, however, we wanted to get minority candidates whose experiences would best represent the pool of minority students who enter into teacher education. Some minority students may be the more traditional student in that they entered teacher education from high school. Or they may be less traditional in that they were instructional aides, and, now older, have decided to pursue a degree in teaching. Some students may have started at a community college and have transferred to the four year institution. Others may have been in the College of Arts and Sciences and transferred into the College of Education. By selecting participants whose experiences differed we could develop a better picture of how the particular teacher education program affected the students.

In our selection process, we interviewed four male and eight female students who represented programs in elementary, secondary, bilingual and special education. The males majored in elementary education, secondary math and

physical education, special education and bilingual education. The ages of the participants ranged from twenty-two to forty-seven years. Seven of the participants were going to school full-time; three had stopped out for several years before returning to school and two were attending school on a part-time basis. The twelve teacher education candidates participated in two teacher education programs located in southeastern New Mexico and southwestern Texas.

Findings

In our initial interviews, we are hearing how entrance requirements for the teacher education program are affecting minority teacher candidates. For some, the failure to pass the entrance test means that they are not qualified and thus, must leave the program. For others, failure on these tests represents a temporary setback. For some, this setback can mean staying out a semester or as much as one or two years. At the same time, failure on the tests brings both an emotional and financial cost. Emotionally, their self-esteem is lowered

or in jeopardy. Financially, the tests cost money and often this is money that is scarce.

We are also discovering that the cuts in Federal monies are especially felt by minority teacher candidates. We have found that some students work during the school year, so that, they can earn enough money to take one or two summer courses. This often means that they remain in the teacher education program for one or two years longer than the average. Others have proudly shared how parents and relatives work several jobs so that they can support their education.

We are hearing minority teachers candidates address what we are presently calling "administrative silence." This represents the silence or lack of attention that administrators, from program directors to advisors, have in regards to programs and support services for minority students. Many programs exist that provide support for minority students but some students do not know of their existence.

Understanding the Support System of Hispanic Teacher Education Candidates

The research suggests that among the abundance of research available on mentoring and support systems; there is minimal research done on mentoring support systems based on the Hispanic perspective. What is presented in the research literature is the perspective of mentoring support systems by Euro-Americans about Hispanics and other foreign minorities (Hollridge, 1990; Fields, 1990; Whitely, Dougherty & Dreher, 1991).

Our study seeks to understand the Hispanic perspective of college "mentoring" support systems. By integrating the Hispanic voice into "mentoring" support systems, more successful support systems can be developed, affecting recruitment, attrition and graduation.

Today this term "mentoring" has been used in many fields to mean a method or manner for fostering assistance to those in that field (Jacobi, 1991). In higher education,

mentoring has been defined as a process, a function, a socialization, or an undertaking. It has also been referred to as a provider who, protects and nurtures for the purposes of instructing, counseling, guiding, facilitating, and role modeling opportunities to grow intellectually. This mentor also refines and develops skills and facilitates successful entry for the protege into academic and professional circles.

Jacobi (1991) further notes that research done on race, gender, and age of the mentor and protege show inconclusive results. It is generally agreed that mentors are older than their proteges. Cross-gender and cross-race mentoring research is also inconclusive. It seems to depend in what field of study the research was conducted. Some researchers, though have found cross-gender relationships to be effective.

In our study, mentoring is defined as a process where the mentor provides comprehensive support and concern to a protege and assists a protege to become a full participant in the organization to which the mentor and protege belong. We

continue to hear the need for caring persons who will give of their time. We hear of the need to have sustained individual contact with people, especially people knowledgeable about a college system. These people may be professors, peers, friends, or upper class students.

What our study has clarified for us is the understanding that mentoring is a process sensitive to the cultural needs of the mentor and the protege. We have also come to understand the role that mentoring plays within support systems. Before this study, we understood mentoring to be a support system. Through the in-depth interviews we have come to see that mentoring is an essential process that is used within these systems. It is a process of human interaction within a support system and the mechanism by which a cultural bond is nurtured to provide interactive support. The participants have spoken about the types of mentoring support they use. Two recurring support themes have surfaced, 1) the family support system called "La familia", and 2) the group support system called

the "Dile system".

The first theme spoken about by the participants is the theme of familial support, called "La Familia". Most Hispanic students come from a cultural system that relies on an extended family and network of friends who provide a close and personal relationship. Life traditions are important. This extended familial support is defined as "La Familia" support system.

Included in this tradition is the inculcation at an early age for respect and the desire to be educated (preparado). One participant speaks about her parents' desires for education.

> **I think that I was really scared of my parents. They never told me, "You have to get good grades". They just expected it. So, I think, I felt that if I didn't get good grades they were going to look down upon me.**

Another participant notes:

> **My parents always expected us, [to] go to college. My sister, [who] is four years younger was expected [to go to college]. Like I said, our parents expected us all to [go] to shool.**

Also, the acceptance by and the belonging to "La familia" are accepted as a necessary life bond. "La familia" provides a network system of support and nurturing that is a source of support throughout his or her life. This bonding support provides the students a means of survival as they prepare for life outside the family, and will later sustain them when they leave home. In turn, the family system is strengthened by the support that the student provides to the family system.

All the participants benefit from this system of support. The students understands that this support is there when they need it. Also, it is understood that with this support is a life long commitment to the family support system.

One participant speaks about his La familia" support.

> **So, I've had lots of support from my parents and they're always [there for me]. . . Even now, I've been in school since 1984 [and] I've only worked one year. But my parents are, as far as education goes, they're there [for me]. I live 32 miles from where I went to junior high school and high school. [My parents would tell me], if you want to be in any kind of extra curricular activity, we're there [to support you]. We'll**

> **take you in before school and we will pick you up after school. That just shows how much dedication [they had for me].**

Another participant talks about her college experience and the need for the "La familia".

> **I stayed at the dorms and then after that I went to live with my sister. [Living with my sister] helped me in a way that I wasn't lonely. I had family here. I stayed there. I would come home and there was food.**

The Hispanic need for the support of the family is on-going. The Hispanic students brings to college this close cultural system of support. The perception of college is viewed through the cultural eyes of the Hispanics. They will come to college seeking support from a system that provides support and mentoring similar to "La Familia" system.

Initial entrance into the university system is perceived as impersonal since the Hispanic students come to college from a closely bonding culture. The impersonal nature of the college system clashes with their home culture, often resulting in feeling lost, scared and frustrated. Many Hispanic

students find themselves in conflict. They have a desire to remain in this impersonal college atmosphere in order to study education and yet, they have a strong desire for the closeness of "La familia" and its support. For some, this conflict causes stress and confusion and often leads the student to return home or to seek a university closer to home.

The second support theme that we have identified is called the "Dile" system. Some students revert to "La familia" for support; others try to resolve their conflict by using "La familia" 's friends who came to college with them to help them interact with the university system. Others may seek Hispanics knowledgeable about the university system to intercede and to assist them in working within the university system. One Hispanic students have called this the "Dile" system.

> **I talked to another lady and she called it the "dile" [system]. People are afraid [and] are shy. I think its because of the oppression and it has been for years. We are oppressed and still [remain] oppressed.**

This participant spoke of the "Dile" system as a syndrome common to Hispanics. She felt that Hispanics needed to eliminate this process. Some Hispanics feel that the "Dile" system is not a syndrome, but a manner of seeking support from the group. We find that this perception of oppression may be due in part to some Hispanics' perception of the university as a place of unequal access. They see the university as an institution that fosters a culture alien and oppressive to the Hispanic.

The term "Dile" means in Spanish, "to tell". The Dile system is a technique used by a student who needs information, but is unable to, or unwilling to approach the source of that information. One example of the use of the "Dile" system is in a classroom situation. The professor has spoken about some topic. The student does not understand what the professor has said. The student is unsure of how to approach the professor for clarification. After class, the student will approach a friend and ask him or her to intercede

"Por favor, tu dile por mi/please, you tell him for me." by asking the professor for clarification.

For example, one student shared:

> **Whenever we would sit together [in class], or another student would remark something that really wasn't nice or could be taken the wrong way. I'd raise my hand and they'd say "dile, dile". [intercede for me, you are more knowing]**

The Hispanic students seek support to sustain them in their new environment. They use systems that are familiar to them. Many of the Hispanics stop-out or have dropped out by not having found a support system that nurtures their personal and academic needs.

Those students that have found the nurturance and support pass onto a college of education. Hispanic students in the college of education see this system as a more personal system. They feel a sense of belonging. This system is seen as a whole unit of support. Some indicators that seem

the participants have told us of their awareness of the many avenues of support and mentoring that a university provides them. The university provides academic and counseling support services. These include academic tutoring, remedial reading and writing programs. Counseling programs for the Hispanic are available through the counseling center, the student health center and student organizations. They provide mental and physical health counseling. Student organizations focus on the student body in general offering typing assistance, areas for study and other academic services. Hispanic organizations focus on academic and financial counseling.

Though many services are available to the Hispanics, they do not see them as support systems. Many may not know how to access these systems of support. That the services are supportive in nature is not in question, but the Hispanic

participants indicate that these services may not be organized in a supportive manner familiar to them. One example of how Hispanics do not use a support system is the advising center. At the College of Education level, the advising center, and the assignment of an advisor are examples of support services that the Hispanic may access for support.

In one of the teacher eduation programs in this study, the Colege of Education used a central advisement center. The advising center is located in the main entrance of the college of education building. It is the center from where the students receive on-going advice. Students register here. They are advised on what to schedule for each semester. They receive information on the examinations that are pertinent to the Teacher Education Program. Finally, students are adviced of deadlines that the students must meet.

This center is staffed by two counselors, two secretaries and several work study students. The atmosphere is formal. Due to the large amount of students that pass

"familiar "[3] in the college of education are professors that are "in tune with cultural diversity" notes one participant.

The Hispanic student's tradition of respect for education and those in education fosters the perception that professors are mentors and will offer support. Therefore students rely on professors to assist them with academic and sometimes personal problems.

Professors are characterized as being personal, someone that they can relate to as a friend and take the "time to get to know you." One participant notes:

> **I found out in the College of Education that the [professors] were more [caring]. I guess because the classes here are smaller. You get to know them better. They help you out. Like I tell you those instructors are there for you. They make you feel welcome and you belong.**

The need to provide systems that respond to the cultural needs of support and mentoring is evident. From our findings,

[3] "Familiar" in Spanish means to create a family environment.

participants indicate that these services may not be organized in a supportive manner familiar to them. One example of how Hispanics do not use a support system is the advising center. At the College of Education level, the advising center, and the assignment of an advisor are examples of support services that the Hispanic may access for support.

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This center is staffed by two counselors, two secretaries and several work study students. The atmosphere is formal. Due to the large amount of students that pass

through the office, limited contact time is available per student. In addition, paper work, registrations and class changes consume much of the counselors' time.

The Hispanics may use the advisement center out of necessity, but coming from a close "La familia" group, many find the formal office environment impersonal.[4]

One Hispanic student notes:

> **There's a lot of my friends [that] don't even bother to go in there. I think there needs to be some kind of system where every student should get advised.**

Another tells us about some of the problems that occur there due to the structure of the advising center.

> **So there I was [with] two credits for the same class and ready to graduate. So I went and asked advising and they said, "No , you're crazy. What do you think you can take [a class] twice and get credit for it?" You know, they told me real sarcastically, just shot me down. I was in tears and I went and told the lady I worked with.**

[4] At the time of the study none of the Advicement Center personnel identified themselves as Hispanic.

This leaves the Hispanic student to seek information to academic problems from friends that have "gone through the classes" and are more personal in their responses to the Hispanic.

A participant speaks to how she selected her classes. When asked, " How did you go to find out about your classes?" She responded.

> **Mostly from friends telling me. I had a real good friend that graduated, her last semester was last December. I had only [taken] two methods classes. So she wrote down a list of what teachers to take for all my methods classes. That was my key, so now I do that with all my friends that are coming up because I want them to get the most out of it.**

Another participant adds

> **We need some kind of . . . maybe each individual college needs a couple of counselors that are just there to talk to people, not academic advisors . . . I just need someone to talk to, not a professional counselor nor a graduate assistant or no one. I guess, [someone] that's kind of professional, just an upper classman, that kind of knows the ropes, someone that is down to earth so that student can ask even personal questions . . . like a mentor program for students.**

The student need for support is evident. Students will seek those systems that best meet their needs.

Conclusion

The meaning of support is personal and cultural. At the college level academic success often depends on the need for use of the support systems available to the Hispanic students. The key is communication between the Hispanics and the university support systems. Communication must foster the understandings that support systems are personal and cultural.

The university support system must accommodate the Hispanics' sense of support. As the Hispanic comes from a culture that is dependent and close to the family, it must nurture the notions of "La familia" and "Dile" support which are so important to the Hispanics. It must incorporate these systems into the support systems of the university. Not only must the student be oriented to the university, but the family as a whole must receive this orientation. It is recommended that this orientation occur in the community of the Hispanics,

in their environment, in their homes, with their friends, and their families. Introduction of the students and their parents to support personnel in an informal college environment and visits to the communities of those students by support personnel would enhance the perception of family caring. These suggestions, not only would provide the Hispanic with a "familiar" setting of support, but would also create a communication base by which to familiarize further the Hispanic to other support systems.

It is believed that as the Hispanics get to know the university, and the university comes to know the Hispanic, not unlike the "familia", both will be strengthened and provide a nurturing environment that will foster success as well as the university support systems.

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